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*Publication date:*  
2017

*Document version*  
Også kaldet Forlagets PDF

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Hirslund, D. V. (2017). *Urbanising Maoism: Reconceptualising the transformation of revolutionary movements*. Paper præsenteret ved SASNET Seminar, Lund, Sverige.

# Urbanising Maoism: Reconceptualising the transformation of revolutionary movements

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May 11, 2017

## Introduction

From the most popular to the most philosophical discourse, then, the struggle for space is acutely political. The stakes are anything but academic. (Smith, 2008, p. 235)

There is a wonderful scene at the beginning of the popular fiction writer Manjushree Thapa's (2005) political reflections on the war from 2005. Belonging to the urban upper-middle class with a fluent command of English and embroiled in the self-congratulatory discourse circulating among the city's elite, she suddenly realises that the more she listens to this jargon, the less she understands what is going on in the countryside around her. Resolutely, she packs her bags and resolves to travel outside the capital and meet these Maoists that she only knows by way of rumours and the thick, white noise produced by high-class, liberal consensus.

This spatial blindness that Thapa is suffering from reveals much about the deep divides existing between Kathmandu and the rest of the country and which over the years have been explained in relation to a centralistic state apparatus (D. Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka, and Whelpton, 2008; Riaz and Basu, 2007), centuries of caste discrimination and subjugation of minority populations (D. N. Gellner, 2008), as well as discursive constructs of the rural hinterlands as backward and lacking in *bikas*, development (Pigg, 1993). While partly compounded today by the steady rise of the southern plains (Terai) as an economical and demographic force, and the increasing remittance returns that create unprecedented wealth flows into the countryside (Adhikari, 2001; Sugden, 2016), Thapa's travel outside the city was therefore a travel in political history. A history layered with examples of how an urban elite has exploited *janajatis*—indigenous minorities—to serve as indented labourers (Holmberg, March, and Tamang, 1999), how it has devised elaborate schemes of land rights and taxation for the establishment of local feudal lords (Regmi, 1978; Burghart, 1984; Sugden, 2013) and how—despite decades of development policies for building schools and roads (Seddon, Blaikie, and Cameron, 1979)—rural Nepal remains

chronically underdeveloped with meagre agricultural output and entire villages emptied of young people without sources of livelihood.

These are, as the geographer Neil Smith reminds us in the introductory quote, some of the deeply politicised struggles over space—spatial control, spatial representation—which Thapa can only experience once she has dislocated herself from her privileged habitat. Yet, the Maoist movement, at the exact moment at which Thapa was traveling to meet them, confronts the diametrically opposite problem. How to "travel" to the cities with their entire arsenal of political weaponry, including a clandestine organisation, an army trained in guerilla warfare, a cadre community of peasant youth and an ideology based on rural mobilisation and confrontation. Maoist politics has developed out of what has later been identified as "dependency theory" and given an iconic formulation in 1966 by A. G. Frank's conception of "the development of underdevelopment" (Frank, 1979). In this view, later globalised through Immanuel Wallerstein's "world systems theory" (Wallerstein, 1974), resources flow from the poorer to richer areas (or countries), allowing the latter to develop at the expense of the former. Nepal's geography of (under)development has been subject to similar forces (Peet, 2007), part political part economic, and provided the Maoists with a fertile environment for expanding their political and military influence to control, at one point, two-thirds of the countryside.

Yet, by 2005, the "People's War" campaign had entered a stalemate, and the Maoist leadership were beginning to build alliances with the mainstream parties and thus paving their way to a slow, agonising—yet hopeful—movement into the urban space of politics. Where Thapa's travels were resolute and reasonably straightforward, the CPN-M's (Communist Party of Nepal) were hesitant and reverberated throughout the nook's and corners of the movement for a long time. Both, however, had to cross lines that were not merely geographical but which separated urban from rural politics discursively, materially, organisationally, and along lines of class and ethnicity. Less than two years after Thapa's travel into the country-side, the roles were reversed. Now it was Maoist cadres who came to visit the capital to protest against the monarchical power, resulting in the overthrow of King Gyanendra in the spring of April 2006, leading to the historical peace agreement seven months later.

In this paper, I want to raise the question of what it means to take Maoism seriously as a political movement aspiring to effectuate permanent change in the fabric of society and what might be the possibilities for a reconceptualisation of Maoist politics that is attentive both to the spatial 'blindness' identified by Thapa and to the historic shifts experienced by Nepali Maoism in its process of urbanisation? There is therefore a double reflexivity to such a project, one which involves both a critique of knowledge in general and a critique, or reappraisal, of how Maoism has become politically reconstituted in a post-revolutionary context. Both movements require going against the grain, as it were, but not necessarily in the same way. I shall start by elaborating on the blindness of the automatised perspective on Maoism by arguing that the spatial opacity is in fact also ideological, as it is tied to a particular, 'liberal' understanding of revolutionary left movements. I then offer a short ethnographic anecdote on the

political cosmology of revolutionary temporality before digging into a historical analysis of three crucial questions on Maoist politics that I consider in need of readdressing in order to illuminate, not merely the implosion of Nepali Maoism, but the larger question of the constitution of democratic politics which I see as the general problematic around which competing political visions coalesce.

In more general terms, what I aim to do here is to begin a long overdue conversation on how Global Maoism, as an example of contemporary revolutionary left movements, struggles to transform its initial successes into a consumable form under the aegis of mass society and, as in this case, mass democracy. Maoism is not alone in facing the challenge of how an outside position can be negotiated to a position of relative strength within a parliamentary political framework but this case, I hope, is illustrative for an expanded understanding of political transformations. Ultimately, then, this paper speaks to general efforts at probing the unfolding of social and political movements worldwide that seek to address a certain crisis of parliamentary party-politics, not least in contexts of rapid capitalist expansion. Nepal is no exception in this regard, having moved from a 'managed democracy' up until the 1980's to, in particular, economic liberalisation in the 1990's at the same time as formerly excluded population groups increased their pressure on the state for inclusion and recognition. Maoism was born in Nepal as an effort to explicitly address, and mediate, this double demand for recognition (against discrimination) and redistribution (against poverty).

## Liberalism against Maoism

Allow me to start with an observation on the nature of academic critique: Each generation must struggle against the theoretical wisdom laid down by the generation before so as to arrive at conceptions fit for the specific challenges it now faces. The struggle to understand anew is therefore a process of unentanglement, discovery and reformulation against the grain of established knowledge.

Since the victory of liberal politics over communism, first with the Chinese turn to state-capitalism and then with the fall of the Communist bloc in Eastern Europe, it has become more difficult to explore radical political movements because they are automatically measured against the supposed norms of liberal politics. This not only delegitimises alternatives to liberalism but renders its characteristics opaque as a political proposal with a tendency rather to 'socialise' their political dynamics. Maoism, in particular, suffers from such a position of opaqueness because it self-reflexively employs a language considered to be antiquated— notions such as the revolutionary vanguards of the peasantry, class war and, not least, dictatorship of the proletariat. In using such language Maoism seems to inflict upon itself, voluntarily as it were, the marks of pre-modernity, the kind of irrelevance which stems from being out of beat with the times, unable to catch up intellectually and 'stuck' in the past. And indeed, Maoism itself speaks to this insecurity of its relevance for history when it competes, internally and externally, to redefine its mission in the context of "the 21st century" so as to shed itself from the stench of decaying theories of

revolutionary action.

The challenge here, as I have already indicated, is related to the historical shifts in global politics which have, in turn, made salient certain paradigms while blocking off others as 'irrelevant', 'old school', or simply 'faulty'. Of course, as we know from the history of science, it is in the nature of paradigms to have 'moments' and respond to historical urgencies by co-opting neighbouring fields while at the same time resisting, or even expunging adversarial propositions. But the sliding of Marxist theories of power based on class from the late 1970's and the rise of postmodern theories preoccupied with individual experiences and expressions cannot so easily be separated from the parallel skepticism with state authoritarianism and geopolitical shifts towards more indirect forms of rule with the advent of neo-liberalism and neo-managerialism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007). What has emerged out of these academic battles, which have not always been decisive and are in many ways ongoing, are a range of analytical 'truisms' which in various ways work to block off a recognition of Maoism on its own terms.

But why do we want to take an understanding of Maoism on its own terms? Are we not well-served by a comparative language on political institutions that precisely make it possible to escape value-judgements in political theory so as to arrive at general notions on what good political conduct consists of? While this is not the place to engage in a longer critique of positivist theories of politics that have sought to create value-free measurement for the performance of state institutions, let me just make two observations on some of the most obvious shortcomings of this positivist trend.

1. First, despite their best intentions, positivist approaches to political action base their hypotheses on prevalent ideologies of what politics *should* be like and therefore end up with a circular argumentation problematic: seeking to find that which they have already decided counts. In the most extreme cases this leads to teleological approaches, as in the case with some theories on democratisation, whereby heterogeneity (or 'variation') becomes subsumed into a hierarchy of 'fits', rendering the least applicable cases examples of inferiority. This kind of theoretical ordering thereby swiftly turns into a parochialism with historical and spatial links to Orientalism unable to explain very much except the narrowness of its own vision.
2. Second, the very language of politics—what counts as political action, how institutions and states are perceived, and how measurements are made—relies on a deeper repertoire of how to think about the nature of societies and humanity in general which is entangled with historical ideological formations. So, for instance, because Euro-American political philosophy generally accepts the liberal idea that individuals are ontologically 'free', the problem becomes one of understanding why we accept the 'sovereignty' of society to rule over us. Theoretically, this has given rise to an entire industry of concepts that automatically follow the study of politics such as the question of authority, legitimacy, or bureaucracy and—not least

because the modern liberal state has displaced the nature of violence into capillary forms of control—the problematic of so-called 'extra-systemic' movements that rely on some level of corporeal power to grow. This is not to say that such languages of politics are irrelevant but only that they carry ideological baggage and their usability needs to be carefully assessed in each case rather than assuming that they constitute a superior approach to politics. In fact, the exact opposite may very well be the case.

In the case of Maoism, which has historically positioned itself as an alternative model of politics—against both capitalism and liberalism or certain versions thereof—it therefore seems to make particularly good sense not to adopt dominant frameworks for understanding political formations but to make an effort at understanding Maoism on terms that do not beforehand cordon off certain aspects of its practices or theories as illegitimate. In this talk, I therefore seek to identify some of the areas in which Maoist politics struggles, in its own way, with formulating and redefining what it considers to constitute core questions of its political formation.

## Revolutionary temporality

When I started my fieldwork with the Maoist movement in early 2009, one of the first signs that my preconceptions of politics were insufficient to grasp the significance of the Maoist revolution in Nepal came in an interview I had with a leader of the youth movement, the Young Communist League. Presenting himself in full army tire in an otherwise inconspicuous office building outside the Ring Road that encircles the capital, Kathmandu, he went on to lecture me about the current moment that Nepali politics found itself embroiled in. It was a narrative I thought I was well acquainted with: after a prolonged 'People's War' between 1996 and 2006, the CPN-M (The Marxist-Leninist-Maoist party which had been the main protagonist in the armed struggle) had entered into peace negotiations resulting in a formal agreement in November 2006. I was aware that the reasons for the Maoist shift from a strategy of war to one of parliamentarism were complicated and nearly led to a split in the party but the perspective I was presented with from the regional commander sitting cross-legged on the floor across from me told a different kind of story.

This was a story with a temporality at odds with the one I had rehearsed. The commander presented me with a narrative, not of the CPN-M as such, but of the revolution as an object of knowledge and with its own political trajectory. The revolution, he explained, while illustrating his thoughts on paper, consists initially of a rapid progression representing the phase where the movement gains momentum. Historically, this period coincided with the decade of guerilla warfare but the quality of this moment was represented merely in terms of velocity and to concretise the speed of revolutionary progression he wrote down the figure 100 km/h which should be evaluated in the context of the technology of transportation in the mountainous forest-covered landscapes where

the CPN-M lived and grew. Here, with few roads and an intricate infrastructure of narrow, winding footpaths in dense terrain, the predominant form of transportation is hiking so a speed of 100 km/h can be likened not to the utopia of motorised transport—which never reaches such speeds in these areas except in emergencies—but to the unhindered flight of the fastest birds.

But if the revolutionary moment leading up to the transition could be conceptualised as a speedy progression, against the terrain of politics so to speak, then what characterised the current moment of politics? In the dominant discourse of the national media, international commentators as well as researchers, the period since the signing of the Peace Agreement was one of hope, restored peace and stability which promised a recovery of the country's stifled economy and democratic aberrations. Bilateral and supranational political and economic support poured in to assist in this opportunity to get Nepal back on the track of modernisation and democratisation which had gotten off to a late start with the liberalisation of political and economic institutions only after 1990 but had been put on a back-burner with the outbreak of the insurrection in 1996. In the eyes of this motley group of national and international optimists, now was—finally—a promising time of prosperity and growth.

But the YCL commander's vision was different. After the progression of revolutionary potentiality during the war, the CPN-M were now caught in an interim period which had little prospect for advancing their long-term goals. The commander illustrated this revolutionary 'transition' by drawing a horizontal line across the paper to indicate the break with the vertical movement of the previous period. He did not need to enhance the illustration by adding speeds of 0km/h: the picture told the story. This was a standstill. Here, nothing important could happen. From the perspective of the revolution, this was simply a period of waiting. However, he continued, *after* this transition, the revolution would once again pick up speed and continue to accelerate—infinity it seemed as he ran his pen out over the top of the paper and illustrated the growing velocity with now higher numbers of speed on top of each other. First 100 km/h, then 150 km/h and 200 km/h. The message was not difficult to discern: the potentiality of revolutionary progression was unlimited, it had no immediate, concrete goal but consisted in fact of its forward movement.

There is, of course, a history to this particular modelling of revolution, based in particular on Trotsky's ideas of "permanent revolution" later to be reformulated by Mao as a continuous struggle against reformism on all levels of society. But the point I want to make here is a different one. Namely that the establishment and the Maoist perspectives on the current period of peace was radically at odds even though both camps employed the language of 'transition'. What for the Maoists described a momentary stand-still in an otherwise forward-moving political process was from a dominant perspective the resumption of movement after a period of regression. These two models of the political were not just different, they were almost *the exact inversion* of each other, like a photographic negative image where white areas are black. Clearly, in such a context of radical conceptual disagreement, there is not easy position of distant scholarly objectivity. But why kind of analytical space can be opened up for talking about

political transformation without reducing either to a negative caricature of the other?

### Three perspective on Maoism

Let me offer three different and tentative answers to this challenge that all start from the particular historical challenges faced by the CPN-M as it struggled with the question of what it would mean to abandon the 'People's War' campaign in favour of a compromise and alliance with the political system.

The first proposition deals with the shift in the conception of alliances and enemies which occasioned a ground-breaking rearrangement of the political landscape, even if it was a slow process which took form over several years and which left a permanent mark on the CPN-M. The rise of the Nepali Maoist movement, occurred against a background of failed modernisation and rising exasperations at a post-autocratic multiparty governance that proved incapable of addressing engrained poverty and longitudinal inequalities throughout Nepali society. On a day-to-day level, the Maoists existed as an organisational network mobilising against the state. On another level, however, the leadership was deeply engaged in reading political winds, building alliances, and updating party programs to reflect shifting international and national political environments.

The CPN-M's hard-nosed work of ploughing through the countryside to unsettle the territorial sovereignty of the Nepali state was never merely about taking over the country bit-by-bit; it was just as much about shaking up the settled arrangement of political order, to break the hegemony of a model they considered to be flawed and to institute an alternative, which was more democratic, less elitist, and which broke not just with the hill Brahmin dominance in political affairs but also with a Hindu monarchical legacy of rule through divine ordinance. To understand this latter aspect of the Maoist revolution, it is helpful to locate it within the larger conjuncture of Nepali state-formation, which began in the 18th century. The establishment of modern-day Nepal should be seen in the context of British colonial expansion into South and South-east Asia and the gradual shift from imperial rule to an era of independent and sovereign nation states. Since the establishment of the East India Company in 1612, Britain slowly expanded its influence to displace the Mughal empire. The South Asian region, including the Himalayas, were at this time organised into separate kingdoms, and more or less loosely integrated into the Mughal courts in the Western Gargetic Plains. Starting with Company Rule in India from 1757 and more direct colonial governance after 1858, Britain gradually expanded its territorial possessions, conquering Sikkim in 1853, invading Bhutan in 1865 and colonising Burma (then Kongbaung Dynasty) in 1885. To the north, the Qing Dynasty conquered Tibet in 1720 and successfully repelled invasions by the Sikh Empire between 1841-1842 and the British Empire during 1903-04. The Nepali state developed within these frontier disputes that were economic as much as they were political, since the country served as an important trade route between the Tibetan plateau and the South Asian region (Rankin, 2004). Starting



from a series of conquests in the mid 18th century, the ruler of the relatively small principality of Gorkha, Prithvi Naryan Shah, first seized the strategically important Valley of Kathmandu (1768), then expanded outwards until he was stopped by the Qing Dynasty in the North (1791) and the expanding British troops to the South and West in the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814-16.

Following these defeats the newly established kingdom pursued a policy of isolation centred around intrigant and lavish court life in the capital and feudal relationships with the remainder of the country, no doubt in order to minimise their economic and political dependency on the British Raj (Whelpton, 2005). As a consequence, Nepali rulers were able to institutionalise an elaborate cosmology of Hindu hierarchy, despite numerous rivaling traditions and religious beliefs throughout the country. These ideas centred on the sacred power of Lord Vishnu and were given detailed form in the 1847 Mulukhi Ain Code, which outlined a system of vertically organised castes for the entire country according to their purity and enslavability (Riaz and Basu, 2007; Burghart, 1996). Political liberalisation after 1990 (see introduction) had adopted a constitution which limited monarchical power to ceremonial affairs but the CPN-M, along with other republican forces, were critical of the incomplete break with a Hindu cosmological foundation of political order, which had been in effect for more than two centuries.<sup>1</sup> Without addressing the co-constitution of ceremonial power and subordination of castes in a Hindu polity, the Maoists argued, it was going to be difficult, if not impossible, to address the exclusion and subjugation of lower-caste and minority populations. This historical situation makes Nepali Maoism unique, as it was not merely fighting within a liberal political framework such as in India, Peru or the Philippines. Rather it has developed through its persistent critique of, and embattled relationship with, a particular Hindu philosophy of politics.

Yet, from the outset, the Maoist campaign of "People's War" was complicated by the fact that the forces of the state that the Maoist confronted were other political parties that had until very recently themselves been opposed to royal rule and were, as a result, closer to the Maoist position of defenders of a democratic polity. A curious tripartite division of political authority therefore began to take form with the development of the insurrection, reflecting a fragmentation of executive arms of the state. Whereas the government, as the formal executive, controlled the bureaucracy, including the armed police force, the king controlled the Royal Nepal Army while the Maoists gradually strengthened their own military forces that after 2001 became organised into army formation with the establishment of the People's Liberation Army. The division was also spatial. Maoist strength was concentrated in key mountainous provinces outside district centers and urban areas, gradually spreading from Western to Eastern Nepal; state police were only present in district headquarters and gradually withdrew to larger urban areas with the onset of the conflict. The King's army were distributed in pockets around the country but significantly

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<sup>1</sup>While Nepal was unified under central rule from Kathmandu in 1768, the history of religious legitimisation of political power in the Kathmandu valley stretches back to at least the 13th century with the establishment of the Malla Kingdom

stronger in Kathmandu than elsewhere, reflecting the centrality of palace powers. But between 1996 and 2001, the Maoists were only fighting the police and their campaigns were directed at the local arms of the state. At this level of the conflict, the struggle thus remained locked between different versions of democratic governance—liberal or Maoist—and boiled down to demands on the government for more inclusion, more development, more equality. This opposition was unable to address the question of kingship with its separate procedures of authority—divine not democratic—and its reservoir of military powers vested in the national army.

Then in June 2001 something happened that changed this balance and paved the way for another phase of the conflict. During the first phase, palace powers had formally stayed outside the conflict between the Maoists and the government. On the face of it, this reflected the more passive role of the king in a constitutional monarchy. On several occasions, however, the Prime Minister had asked the reigning King Birendra to mobilise the military against the Maoists, which he had rejected, thus resisting an intensification of the conflict. While the precise reasoning behind this restraint have not yet been unearthed, the palace decision to keep outside the battle between the two opposed political forces replays the ceremonial and elevated position taken by the monarch since the reinstatement of the Shah rulers in 1950; namely that they represent the entire *desh*, country, and that they should safeguard the nation and its inhabitants by staying above day-to-day quarrels between political actors. Such a position has been shown to fit quite snugly with Hindu political theology that maps divinity onto the physical terrain and it has been exploited by autocratic rulers long before 1950 to turn their stewardship into an argument about the king as protector of national integrity and order. This discourse about the need for national unity through conciliatory politics continues to exert a strong moral force in current discourses on development and democracy, reflecting in part Nepal's non-colonial history that has not needed to confront external enemies to attain sovereignty but rather internal ones with much more blurred lines between the moral forces of political order. Another important reason lies with the intimate relationship of national self-determinancy and development discourse, which has encompassed debates on political forms within a wider narrative of what is good for Nepal and its population. Though there have been significant shifts in this conceptualisation since it took form with King Mahendra's policies in the 1960s and the arrival of international donors in the country, it has formed a significant current in establishing political legitimacy both before and after the 1990 restoration of parliamentary democracy.

What in the literature on kingship is referred to as "the King's two bodies" has therefore in Nepal rather been three. Apart from the "body" of the mortal man who rules through profane powers (the state, the military) and the "body" of the divine being that incarnates eternal and sacred wisdoms, there is the power associated with representing the whole, in its entirety, as an undivided unity. The Nepali king is also the king of development, of a prosperous and united country based on his powers to represent the people and the environment as a singularity. His field of vision is not impeded by divided or factual

Are these two points fully comprehensible in this condensed form?

interests; indeed it is a disinterested vision based, obviously, on its association with divinity but not limited to merely reproducing the king; rather, it seeks to realise the country's (supposed) aspirations for unity and prosperity. Contemporary Nepali nationalism builds on this larger political theology which combines order, representation and development into a forceful argument about moral authority in political affairs. More than just a particular configuration between monarchical exceptionalism and an international development regime, it has extended into the post-monarchical period and frames the programs of all dominant political parties whose access to office depends on their ability to represent common national development interests.<sup>2</sup>

If we accept this expanded analytic of Nepali nationalism and kingship, we can begin to see the complicated alliances it has opened up for with the warring Maoists after they started sensing the success of their insurrection before the turn of the millenium. While on one front fighting the government, the Maoists—like the king—were not interested in factional political struggles but aspired to represent the plight of "the people," *janata*, in its entirety.<sup>3</sup> On one level, the Maoist leadership shared with the palace its criticism of factional political actors that did more to split the country than unite and develop it. They were in sympathy with a political urge to represent it *in toto* but, unlike the king, they believed that the solution lay with a more radical form of democracy, not the abolishment of it and return to an autocratic state. So, while a potential alliance could be built on this "third body" of the king—as representing the plight of the nation as a whole—the Maoists were very critical of his "second body", divine authority, and antagonistic towards the first, the military, whose passivity had greatly boosted Maoist victories.

Before June 2001, in which King Birendra was killed along with his entire family, therefore saw a rapprochement between the Maoists and the king. In building relationships with the palace, the Maoists were positioning themselves to attack the state on two fronts: their direct attacks on its political and economic infrastructure sought to accomplish the gradual shift of balance in territorial control. The alliance with the palace, on the other hand, sought to develop a language of legitimacy that were prior to questions of sovereignty, as they concerned the very right to rule. These latter procedures of legitimacy matter little without the ability to wield concrete political power, including power in

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<sup>2</sup>Collusions of development discourse and political legitimacy continues in the present, as the Nepal government in 2016 endorsed 13 of UNDP's 17 2025 development goals.

<sup>3</sup>This is not to claim that, as an evolving social movement, the *maobaadi* did not also develop its own internal contradictions and were also simply power hungry. I will return to some of these contradictions in subsequent chapters, but in order to appreciate the changing relationships between major political forces in the region, we need an analytic that allows for a differentiated understanding of political rationales. In deliberating alliances between political actors, overlapping logics often coexist and even strengthen or cancel out each other. These are not just the quarrelling positions of different actors, of which they are many in the CPN-M, but the need to be addressing several and often incompatible challenges at the same time. Borrowing their vocabulary from Maoist warfare, CPN-M leaders speak of these different logics through the pair of strategy and tactics. Unlike the social theory conception in which these refer to different forms of power, Maoists consider strategy to deal with long-term movement goals and tactics to concern the operational level of day-to-day policies.

its most raw form as the power over life and death. The Maoist war had showed them capable of developing their own monopolies on violence, a power which in turn granted them access to the palace.<sup>4</sup> However, the palace massacre violently blocked off this curious rapprochement, and the positions between the Maoists and the royal palace immediately hardened, as the Maoists published a critical letter in a leading newspaper on the event, denouncing it as an anti-nationalist coup against King Birendra's "liberal political ideology" and "patriotism" which evidenced an "important contribution of the Shah kings", which was to "preserve Nepali independence and sovereign status from the hands of British imperialism and later from Indian expansionism."<sup>5</sup>

For a period, between late 2001 and early 2005, the Maoists faced their most trying period as they were engaged on not just one, but two fronts. Following the palace massacre, the unofficial truce between the Royal Nepal Army and Maoist military forces was broken. This was a period in which military battles greatly intensified and the new King Gyanendra took a much more offensive role in the political conflict. After a series of failed efforts to control the government by proxy, parliament was formally dissolved on February 1st, 2005, and Gyanendra assumed emergency powers. This was a turbulent time for Nepali politics. Before the killing of King Tribhuvan, the Maoists were mainly considered a rural nuisance and the daily management of the state was largely unaffected. After 2001, everyday life became increasingly militarised as the Royal Nepal Army with backing from the USA in the new global front against terrorism cracked down heavily on civilians who were thought to sympathise with the Maoists. Most of these atrocities, in which both Maoists and the army participated, were confined to the rural mountain areas and therefore received little public attention. Yet, after the 2005 royal coup, civil society organisation and urban intellectuals became outraged, as this replayed the former king Mahendra's squashing of democracy in 1960, and which had resulted in 30 years of royal rule. This line of reasoning, associated with the major political parties who participated in the 1990 return to parliamentarism (Nepali Congress and the UML), holds that Nepal has been on a path of democratisation since the 1950s where liberal political principles—rule of law, democratic voting—were instituted for the first time. In this view, the 1990 dissolution of royal autocracy is seen as a "restoration of democracy" and the 2005 coup a serious threat

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<sup>4</sup>Many observers have claimed that the Maoist movement was dealt with chiefly as a law-and-order problem for the first many years of the insurrection. The analysis I am offering of tripartite relationship between key political forces complicates this picture somewhat. For whereas the Maoist relationship with government forces prior to 2001 might indeed have been sought delegitimised through a language of insurrection as an illegal and criminal act, the Maoists were careful to invest their violence with moral arguments against injustice. It was this deeply moral component of revolt—what qualified it as a revolution—that I would argue made possible what Baburam Bhattarai called "an informal alliance" between the palace and the Maoists. Both claimed their political actions to be deeply moral—couched in nationalist terms—though for one it took the form of passivity whereas for the other it was expressed through war.

<sup>5</sup>The Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai, who had penned the letter, compared the 2001 event to the 1846 "Kot massacre" in which elite Ranas killed the Shah king and established an authoritarian rule lasting over a century.

to a liberal polity. The Maoist perspective is less jubilant about the successes of liberal governance since little had actually changed for poor people irrespective of the style of government. Yet, there were enough overlaps to justify an alliance between the liberal pro-democracy forces and the Maoists, weary of war and facing a determined and much more formidable power in the Royal Nepal Army.

This shift of sentiment, from the encompassing nationalism of the palace to the civil society revolt against autocracy, gave rise to a new set of contradictions but it was helped on one crucial front. Suddenly, the political parties who had headed the previous governments and fought the Maoists—the influential Nepali Congress and the newer United Marxists-Leninists—were now also outside the legal bounds of the state and faced harassment and imprisonment of its members. While not exactly sharing the Maoist position of illegality, their ambiguous relationship to the palace-controlled government opened up a space of collaboration against an anti-democratic state. In some ways, this returned key Maoist leaders to the situation they found themselves in during the 1990 movement, and which did not address their crucial critique of how a democratically-elected government could still act undemocratically. But it also opened up a possibility to return to one of their key demands from the previous confrontation with the king, namely that a constitutional monarchy was not an adequate safeguard against the palace's autocratic powers. Only a republican constitution, they repeated, could guarantee democracy to flourish without undue intervention. Maoist revolutionary ideology moved closer to the center of this new anti-establishment political space, united against a common enemy. In November 2005, the Maoists entered into a 7-party alliance and in April 2006, a public uprising against the king's emergency cabinet forced Gyanendra to reinstate parliament and by November 2006, the Maoists had entered into a formal Comprehensive Peace Agreement with the major political parties, with a roadmap for holding constitutional elections, declaring Nepal a republic and integrating the Maoist and Royal Nepali Army into a new secularised national army.

The Maoist strategic shift from a movement engaged in a battle against the state, to allying with banished democratic forces against autocratic rule, and to enter into a peace process where it became part of a new establishment alliance to run a post-authoritarian secular state may on the surface appear to have been rather swift and smooth but, in fact, exactly the opposite has been the case. Throughout the Maoist revolution, the movement has faced complicated and potentially annihilating questions about key strategic questions that have, at several times, threatened to split the party. The changing scenarios I have sketched here have highlighted how a new set of alliances and strategic shifts in the Maoist revolution began a lengthy rapprochement to political normalisation, which have not ended with the 2006 CPA agreement, and which have reverberated throughout the entire political fabric of the party and, indeed, of dominant political culture.

## Revolutionary purposes rethought

One of the interesting questions to arise from this complexity of alliances is what happens to the reconfiguration of the enemy. Susan Buck-Morss, in her book on “the passing of mass utopia” has interestingly written on enemy conceptions in politics based on the reordering of society for the accomplishment of future goals. In concepts of class-war, she warns, the terrain of struggle is temporal, not spatial. The ethnographic anecdote I presented at the outset with the Maoist commander conforms to this perception. There is no privileged place for revolutionary war to occur but there is a particular temporality to its unfolding because “class revolution ... is an advance in time” (p. 23). This would indicate that in class warfare, as Buck-Morss suggests (p. 25), “space is merely tactical, not the political goal” (which is the opposite for the nation-state, i.e. a spatial goal and temporal tactict). This formulation would help us appreciate why the urbanisation of Maoism was such a potentially painful move. Because while it should only be a tactical issue, it nonetheless carried the risk of becoming an obstacle to the revolution by being turned into a goal. The problematic of alliances reveals this much. The spatial shift to urbanity also implied a complete reconfiguration of the enemy-friend dynamics developed during the insurrection with unlimited potential for transforming the core of the Maoist ideology. If former class enemies could become allies, what then would happen to former class allies? Could they suddenly become enemies?

Let me turn now to the second dynamic related to the urbanisation of Maoism, namely the question of ideological reconfiguration. Ideologically, the Nepali Maoist movement has grown out of a longer history of communist debate and oppositional mobilisation in rural pockets around the country since at least the 1930s. In the Western provinces of Rolpa and Rukum, key communist thinkers such as Pushpa Lal and Mohan Bikram Singh have been influential in debating and spreading political analyses of Nepal that focused on the role of the peasantry in a stratified class landscape and which has allowed the Nepali state to exploit rural provinces to the benefit of the Rana rulers in Kathmandu. Later, as autocratic Rana rule was supplanted by a brief democratic opening and then again with *panchayat* monarchy in 1962, communist thinking grew more virulent and reflected the rise in nationalist anti-colonial movements and the successful establishment of socialist, or socialist-inspired, post-colonial regimes throughout previous European colonial possessions. This was also the period in which Soviet communism was in ascendancy and a strong international environment for contemplating non-capitalist modernities and different nation-state models flourished. As independent parties were banned in Nepal during the three decades of monarchical rule, most political organisation against the state—led by the Nepali Congress that had won the national elections in 1959 just before being disbanded by King Mahendra—automatically took a pro-democratic and in most cases also socialist form.

The leaders that came to dominate the Maoist movement after it united in 1995 around a program of peasant insurrection all came out of this intellectual environment between the 60's and 80's in which opposition to the monarchy

was coupled with alternative visions for how to build an inclusive polity geared to tackling the country's long history of underdevelopment. Here, analyses of the reproduction of poverty and the role of the peasantry in modernising the state through industrial agriculture went hand in hand with thoughts on urban vs. rural insurrection and the nexuses between histories of caste discrimination and class privileges that remained patronised by the monarchy that relied on a sanitised Hinduism to gloss over systemic prejudices against ethnic minorities and untouchables. While the rise of global Maoism that took off after the split in the international communist movement also gave birth to a Maoist faction beginning in the early 1970s with Mohan Bikram Singh as the leader, it would be a mistake to trace the ideological history of CPN-M squarely within an ideology of Maoism since it built upon a much wider communist tradition and was shared across a wide spectre of the political opposition. What emerged as the CPN-M in the fall of 1995 when a small group of intellectuals agreed to pursue a strategy of "People's War" was thus a mixture of people with different movement histories and different perspectives and all with a broad involvement in anti-royal protests in the past decades. In significant ways Maoism rose as a particular historical strategy on a canvas of ideological breadth and flexibility. In this light, the shifts in CPN-M thinking, which paved the way for the peace process may therefore appear less startling, if not entirely unsurprising.

In the course of developing a framework for the insurrection, the CPN-M Central Committee based their analysis on two important pillars of Maoist ideology. The first was an analysis of the national class situation in the context of a global capitalist, and hence imperialist, environment. The CC followed standard communist analyses of a division in the nationalist capitalist community between a 'comprador' class which acted as middlemen for international capital and a 'bourgeois' class which used its class position to develop national enterprises. Whereas the first produced chiefly for foreign markets or served big non-national corporations' access to Nepali resources, the latter were in effect serving national interests through their investment in the productive economy, the problem being however that this "development" took place through deeply unjust hierarchies of ownership and labor. While internally divided, the national capitalists nonetheless constitute an oppressing class force in early Maoist thinking.

At this time, a broad section of the Nepalese left considered Nepali society to be semi-feudal and semi-imperialist and the CPN-M built their analysis of insurrection on this tenet. Nepal's semi-imperialism was, and still is, seen to reflect its precarious position between vastly dominant Indian, Chinese and US interests that in different ways interfere in Nepal's internal politics. A crucial component of revolutionary strategy therefore consisted in pushing for and maintaining full independence from foreign interference and to be able to discern how diverse elite classes ally with international forces. The analysis of semi-feudality, on the other hand, discerns the rural political economy as still based on culturally sanctioned labor bondage and a historical alliance between a landed aristocracy and the state which works to subvert formal democratic entitlements. As explained in the introduction, the continued existence of this

feudal political economy owed much to Nepal's lack of industrialisation, with no significant national economies to absorb rural classes into a national framework and the Maoist critique of development therefore concentrated on the peasantry as an excluded and subdued population group. As the "suppressed" classes, CPN-M developed a classification of divisions within the peasantry, from rich, to middle to poor peasants, and the latter were seen to be major oppressed group in society and those who would benefit most directly from a changed polity.

The other important Maoist tenet to influence the young CPN-M was Mao's dialectical and historical analysis of changing conditions for struggle and the necessity to continually revise and update revolutionary programs to reflect an altered political environment. In China, the Communist movement under Mao was forced to adapt to Japan's intervention during the Second World War, which forced a momentary truce with the nationalist forces of Chiang Kai-shek. This sense of where political opportunities lie, and the necessity to manoeuvre, was also at the heart of Mao's conceptualisation of guerilla warfare which continuously searched for the enemy's weak spot and withdrew when faced with a superior force. Such a floating revolutionary politics dominated Mao's thinking and is also a very clear trait in the CPN-M's policy documents. These usually begin with an updated analysis of the current political environment, followed by a new analysis of what constitutes the relevant strategic and tactical lines to be pursued to win the next political battle. Mao's dialectic has suffused CPN-M ideology not only in contemplating adaption to changing environments but have been applied as well in principles for building and changing the organisation. Thus, contrary to the standard view of revolutionary movements as dogmatic and inflexible, Nepali Maoism was never a simple, uncritical application of Chinese Maoism but a continuous reflection on the applicability of experiences gleaned from different historical contexts and an ongoing adjustment of both the strategic and tactical components of class struggle to changing political circumstances. From the beginning, CPN-M incorporated a theory of flexibility through which to pursue its political goals.

And what were then these goals? It is quite interesting that for a long time there were no positive identification of what political system the CPN-M was fighting for. They were reasonably in agreement over what they were fighting against—elite class tyranny—and also the method for doing so—through a proletarian revolution—but clear ideas about how the state should be restructured were not being developed in tandem with the development of their campaigns. As CPN-M gradually established control of mountainous areas, parallel systems of governance were introduced but from the evidence available, few efforts were spent on using these as testing grounds for an alternative vision of a classless society. In some cases, farming collectives were introduced and overt caste discrimination was sought curbed, but instead Maoist leaders brought new systems for distributing justice and whether they inverted social hierarchies or perpetuated existing ones, the sense one gets when reading these accounts is that these "liberated" spaces—called "People's Governments"—were used primarily as bases to further the strategic fight against the state rather than as sociopolitical mod-



els.<sup>6</sup> It seems as if, content with their initial analysis of rural proletarianism and feudal abuses of power, the CPN-M leadership could focus their attention on the development of political strategies and subsume questions of ideology for later. It points to the complicated life of ideological thought in Nepali Maoism, is neither an independent and unchanging doctrine, nor simply a philosophical gloss to legitimise raw contestations for power. Rather, it lives as a fluctuating current that is at times subsumed under tactical goals while at other periods it rises to the surface and gives direction to political development.

If CPN-M's ideological thought until 2001 was principally preoccupied with how to conduct a war of the rural masses, the prospect of a political alliance to fight for the restoration of parliamentary democracy forced its leaders to debate the implications this had on the revolutionary project as a whole. While, as explained, the movement was more engaged in refining its critique of the Nepali state than they were dwelling on what would happen after the revolution, the leadership was formally united behind the principle of a Maoist New Democracy. In Mao's writings on the subject, a New Democracy offers a temporary corporation between peasants, workers, small business owners and the national capitalists on the road to a classless socialist society. This stands in contrast to the Marxist and Leninist revolutionary model which first requires a bourgeois revolution to overcome feudalism and to turn the peasant class into workers, and then a proletarian revolution by the latter against the former. New Democracy is less linear, given to contexts in which industrialism has not transformed the peasantry entirely into workers, and strategically collaborative. The "People's War" had seen the establishment of a broad-based United Front which involved collaborating with different ethnic movements against *parbatiya* (high-caste hill people) hegemony, reflecting CPN-M's tactical flexibility. But the collaboration with the parliamentary parties was of a different order as their agendas could not be co-opted within an idea of a revolution against the elite and their dominance over the state apparatus, as had been the case with the ethnic fronts.

The CPN-M leadership therefore entered these debates over the strategic alliance against King Gyanendra with deepfelt skepticism and anxiety. Following a plenum decision to join multi-party politics from October 2005, a milestone resolution from a Central Committee meeting in early 2006 takes the first cautious steps towards political reconciliation with the proposition to focus their struggle on "interim government, election of a constituent assembly, and a democratic republic".<sup>7</sup> This is an abrupt shift from a phase of strategic offensive since 2004 which had seen an escalation of military confrontations. Yet, it was not at all clear what exactly this republicanism entailed except being "neither a bourgeois

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<sup>6</sup>There are several examples of Maoists seeking to establish model schools and model villages but since research on the movement during the war is lacking, it has only been possible to reconstruct these alternative political spaces through later recollections by participants that show a varied response to being under Maoist control. A critical engagement with Maoist ideas about, and efforts at erecting, so-called "People's Governments" would be able to provide us with a better picture of how Maoist political visions developed and changed in this period.

<sup>7</sup>these issues had been tabled as demands during the failed peace talks of 2002 and 2003 as well but did not make their way into party policy at the time.

parliamentarian republic" nor "directly a new democratic one". The concept of democracy is a haunting one for Nepali Maoists, sharing deep affinities with liberal claims for universal suffrage yet divided over the nature of privilege, related dialectically to the twin-concept of dictatorship without which it is powerless, and possessing a temporality tied to the representative but transitory function of the state. They want it at the same time as they don't want it. For while a movement for democracy opens up a space of opportunity, it risks becoming a trap due to its slippery allegiance with different agendas and by being turned into a goal rather than a phase in the revolutionary strategy.

The leadership's inability to solve the question of what happened to their revolutionary goal of a New Democracy in these new policy formulation left them with an unresolved dilemma. On the one hand, the turn to republicanism was seen as a stepping-stone towards a state ruled by the people and one which was therefore still compatible with proletarianism at large. On the other hand, a constitutional process would not in itself guarantee any significant restructuring of the state and thus fail to address skewed power balances already existing between major classes and ethnic groups in the country. The strategy for addressing this problematic was to further reposition the structural logic of class-conflict onto a temporal logic of a revolutionary future to be accomplished at a later stage. The displacement of justice into a future utopia has deep roots in modern European political thought through the twin concepts of *telos* (greek for purpose) and *eschaton* (greek for end of time), and together they describe "locomotives of history" in Martin Malla's apt formulation (Malla, 2008). In crucial ways, 20th-century state-formation projects have adopted elements of this vocabulary in their quest for realising visions for political transformation and in seeking to galvanise public participation in a politics of the new. While Maoism epitomises such an historical optimism, it thus rides on a broader current of modernisation and development that in similar ways operate with an idea of a utopian future where present-day problems will have been successfully addressed.

As indicated, Maoist political ideology, once formulated, became subsumed under more immediate strategic goals, a flexibility which paved the way for the historic 12-point peace Understanding in November 2005. At the same time, however, the entire gamut of political life from war to peace formed but different elements in the unfolding of a revolutionary trajectory which would lead to a people's democracy. In a crucial sense, the trajectory of Maoism has unfolded through these shifting and at times competing encompassments whereby political and ideological questions are vying for supremacy in the party line. This ambiguity has allowed for the development of two coexisting but distinct narratives of the party's engagement in the peace process. One which insists that participation in multi-party democracy with a republican outcome is a genuine development of Nepali Maoism and a direct result of its war effort. And another which sees parliamentarism as but a phase in the revolutionary project. It is telling, therefore, that the conceptualisation of revolutionary temporality sketched by the YCL commander with which I started this essay, only reflected one, possibly even a minority, position within the ideological rift that

had opened up within Maoist thought in the changed political context.

The uneasy balance between political ideology and strategy thus intensified with CPN-M's alliance with a bourgeois democratic platform and it altered the space for debate within the party. Commentaries on ideology started relegating the war period to a rosy past, thus heroising its accomplishments while stymying reflections on the continued relevance of an analysis of class divisions. This served to detach the trajectory of political change as a progression towards a communist society from an understanding of who were to mobilised, against whom and why, thus effectively cutting ideological thinking in two: questions of *escathon* - thoughts on a revolutionary future - were divided from questions of *telos* - the content of the struggle. While Maoist politics therefore underwent a sea change in its shift to parliamentarism, roads to restoring and updating their analysis of Nepal's social and political structures were effectively blocked off and left urban Maoism roundly unprepared to reconnect the new phase of their struggle with socialist goals.

## Rethinking political subjectivity

Let me end, since time is running out, with a few questions related to the third aspect of revolutionary change that I believe has accompanied the urbanisation of Maoism.

The first of these relate to the question of violence. Clearly, one of the most obvious consequences of the peace process was the formal abandonment of armed struggle. On the organisational level, this led to the sidelining of the People's Liberation Army and to the birth of the Young Communist League as a specifically non-armed, but still "militant" organisation of youth. But how then was violence internalised, pacified and reconfigured? This poses a question not just to Maoism but to liberal politics as well wherein, as Foucault was one of the first to register, violence becomes capillary and disciplinary and its very visual disappearance points not to its negation but rather to its dispersement and displacement.

The second question build on the problematic of what constitutes the core of political action. Liberal politics, in particular, has strengthened the idea of "the subject of interest" (pace Foucault in *Biopolitics*) as the dynamic around which society coalesces. In this view, political groups come into being because of shared interests and their individual participation relies on the ability to enhance personal agency through collective forms. In South Asian politics, there is a long history of trying to overcome this liberal framework for political action in order to push for another relationship between collectivities and individuals based around, for instance, identities and perceptions of political participation as service. Nepali Maoism has been successful in mobilising sacrifice as model of political subjectivity at the same time as they stress the commonality of class-experience for the mobilisation of bodies. But how do such ideas become transformed in contexts of party politics where individual relationships to meaningful activism and patronage become reconfigured? And more to the point, if

sacrifice continues to be a relevant trope for revolutionary subjectivity, what exactly is being sacrificed in a context of peaceful party politics?

Lastly, given the dissolution of the soldier with the fading away of armed conflict, how is the cadre repositioned as a political agent? Does cadreship return to a hegemonic notion of activism as a personal engagement based on the 'private' individual, dividing his or her time between politics, work and personal life? Is there still a space for the totalising vision—and discipline—of soldiering and what form, or forms, does such a position take?

## Concluding remarks

Together, these three all too brief questions point to some of the larger challenges we face as researchers when we seek to evaluate the changing nature of political action beyond the stabilised visions of dominant understandings of democratic politics based on fixed measuring rods related to procedures and institutions. The urbanisation of Maoism in Nepal should give us pause to develop a more nuanced vocabulary of how to conceive of diverse efforts at instituting a politics based on the idea of people. After all, this is an area in which we all have much to learn. Thank you.

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